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BRIDGET
RILEY

NEW YORK
Exhibition: Bridget Riley, Sidney Janis Gallery, N. Y., 1975

COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Presented by

*the
gallery*



INTRODUCTION

Most of us are lazy viewers of painting. We rely on skimmed reactions and unfocussed attention to an extent which would seem ludicrous in any time-conditioned experience of art like reading or listening. Thirty continuous seconds are, for many people, quite a good look; one fully concentrated, uninterrupted minute virtually amounts to serious scrutiny (time yourself or your neighbour in a gallery if this sounds an exaggeration). We tend not only to be lazy, we tend on average to be quite extraordinarily ill-equipped for using our eyes intelligently or for knowing with any degree of analytical discipline what it was we saw when we've finished seeing it. That is why painting like Bridget Riley's comes up hopeful, refreshing and strong at a time when much abstract painting, everywhere, has become so academically spiritless that people say the medium is played out. It is far from being played out. It is just that there have not been too many painters around recently capable of showing us how to look and keep looking.

The justification of art is to stretch one's experience. Bridget Riley's painting stretches one's capacity for looking and seeing in ways which have, in their time, been positively resented. It has been called over-active and over-energized (as if to imply some necessary virtue in inactivity or lack of energy). It has been thought insistent and aggressive, and her early black and white works used often to be described in terms of physical assault, although when one returns to them now, over a decade later, they seem less remarkable for any of those qualities than for their fine-tuned precision of form and feeling. But what her painting has always undeniably done is to make the spectator work for his pleasure. It is not impact-painting. It is a conscious and complex organisation of responses which can only be fully experienced with patience. When one begins to search, it begins to give. The eye attunes itself, and the painting releases — held in a kind of activated calm — qualities of light, colour and space which may at first sight be visible but cannot, strictly speaking, be seen.

The visual organisation is extraordinary in operation. It is

as though the painting possessed, in its ability to evade being too easily focussed on, its own built-in mechanics for prolonging attention. The eye learns to understand it, to "work" it, but it has been teased and enticed to learn. And one of the crucial things it learns is not just to watch the painting, but to watch itself watching the painting. One cannot look directly at many of the most beautiful effects of induced colour in these works, any more than one can look at something on the edge of one's field of vision. The effect disappears at the instant of re-adjusting to it. Rather one learns to experience a process of perception which is perhaps as much a mental mode as a physical one, a process of expectant and alerted receptivity. And with a marvellously rejuvenating sense of having acquired some new faculty, one then becomes aware of how intensely and consistently the experience is of now, of the moment of seeing. Perception is actualized as something belonging to a continuous present which is being continuously re-formed.

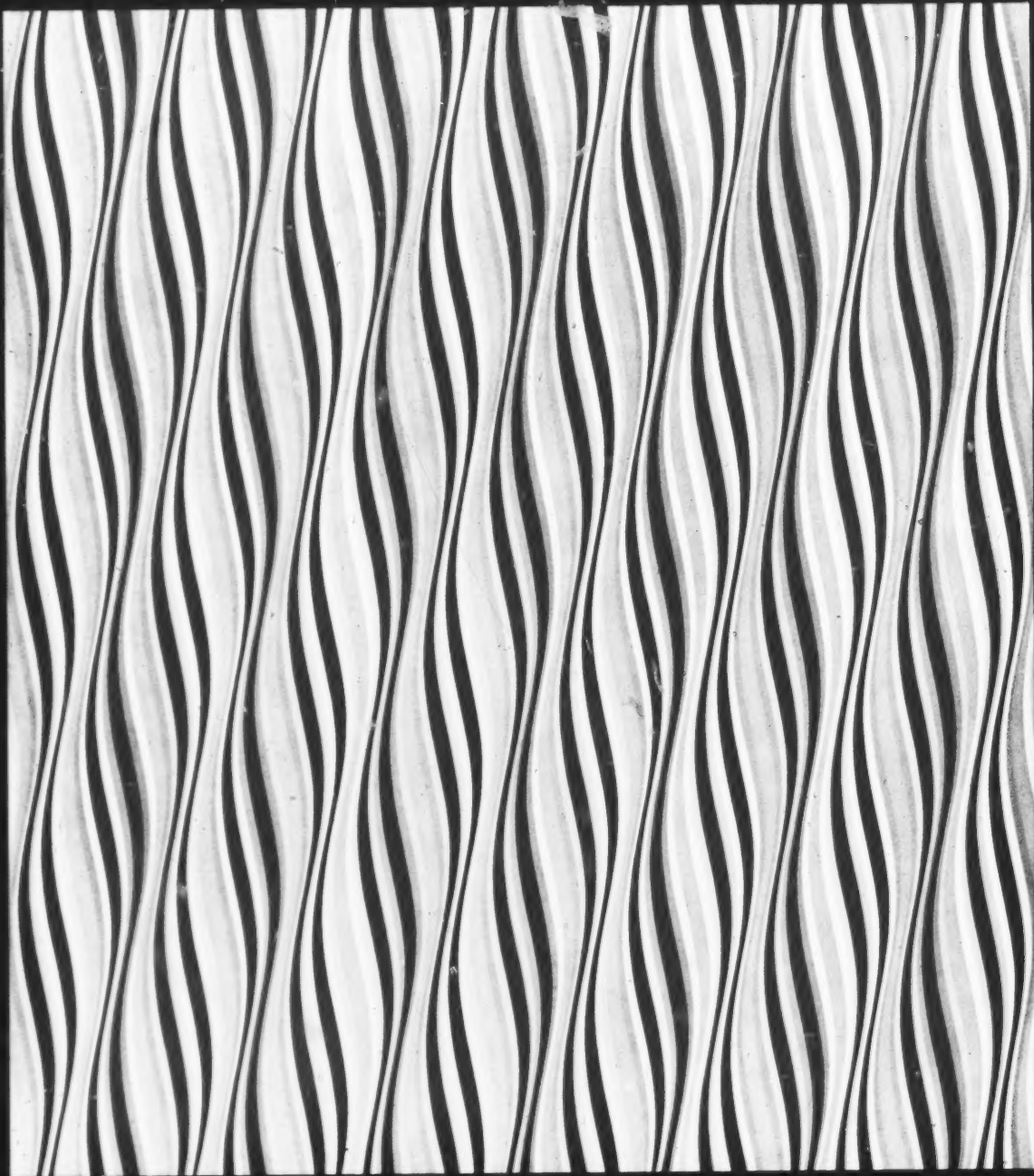
Painters much concerned with light, as Bridget Riley is, develop a particular approach to colour and a characteristic range of colour. It is quite different from surface colour, or saturated colour, or colour seen as the reflection of light rather than an activator and generator of it. Her painting depends on "optical mix" even more than Seurat's (her early mentor) did, in order to achieve purity and the presence of intermediate colours not physically represented on the canvas. But there is the additional quality of induced colour, that is, colour apparently coaxed into being, or as it were, illuminated or reflected, or otherwise modified in hue by its neighbour (which is often in these paintings, and for this purpose, a pure white). Density of colour tends as a result to range from the very full and strong to the exceptionally delicate and pale, and to embrace simultaneously a vivid "presence" and an elusive immateriality. One further characteristic seems related to the transparency of colour — light as seen through a prism. It is that heightened radiance which leads certain painters (one detects it occasionally in Monet and in Turner) into near-acid keys of colour in their pursuit of its purity. Bridget Riley avoids the acidity, but catches the quality of a kind of ethereal sweetness.

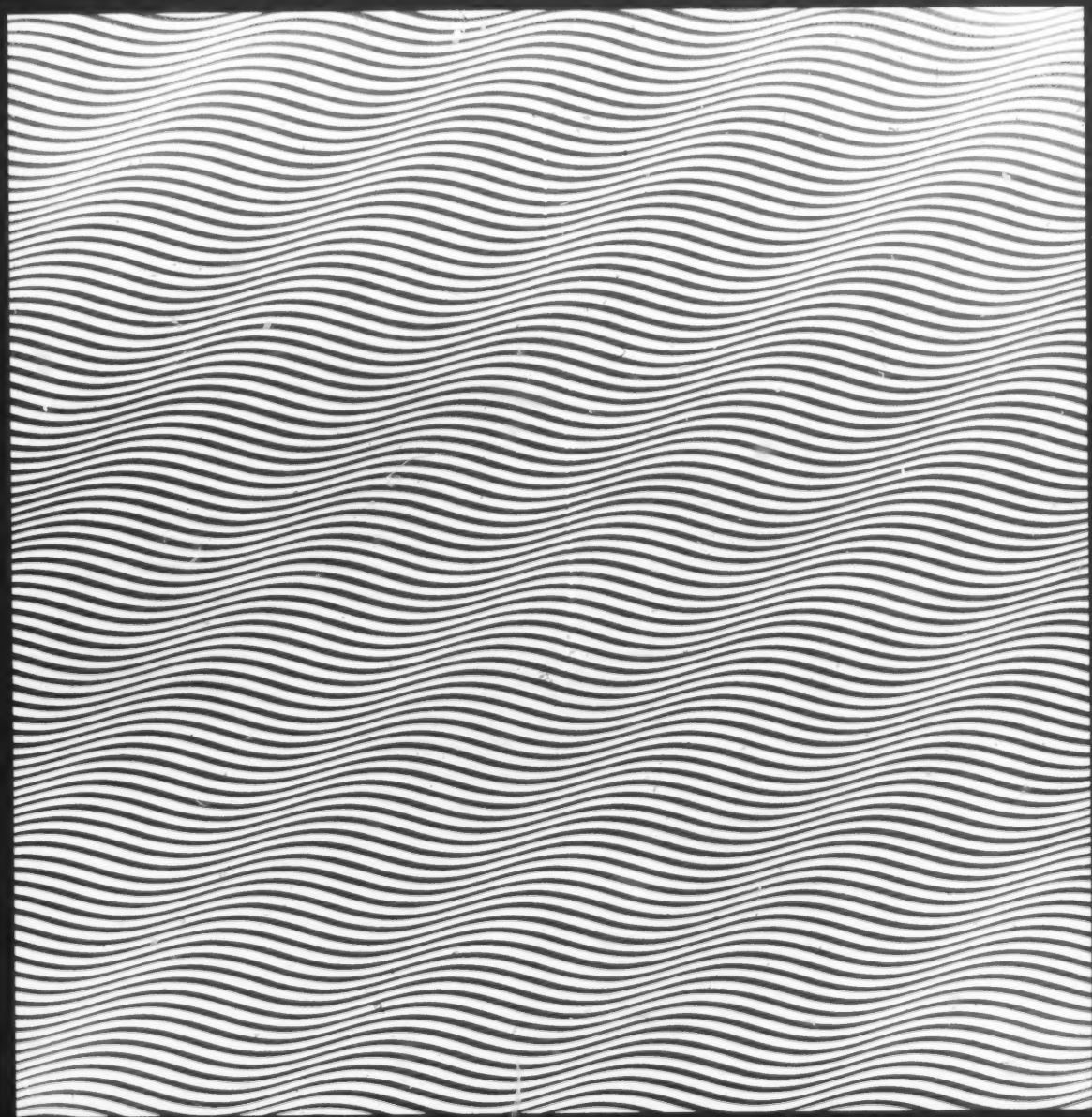
Chinese titles occur from time to time in the recent work, and though in part they may refer only to some unspecific quality of mood or feeling (as a painting might be called "Orient"), they point also to a deepening interest in the classical principles of Chinese scholar-painting. These are seldom literally translatable, but they are suggestive of a constant inter-action and inter-dependence between certain fundamental ideas which she feels to be near many of her own. "Shih-Li" adumbrates qualities of momentum and force in a painting where clusters of variously weighted colour pin down the rushing tide of the surface by forming and dissolving at measurable intervals. "Ch'i-Yün" refers to a "breathing" quality, an inner resonance and life, as the spirit animating a gently upward flow and spread of colour. Comparable articulations of the mood and structure of the painting occur in barely detectable modulations of space. An apparent (though not actual) colour-change affecting the greys and whites towards the central area of "Entice 2" suggests a slight spatial deepening there. The bands of colour in "Paean" step forwards and back with an impetus which only turns into ordered regularity towards the edges of the painting.

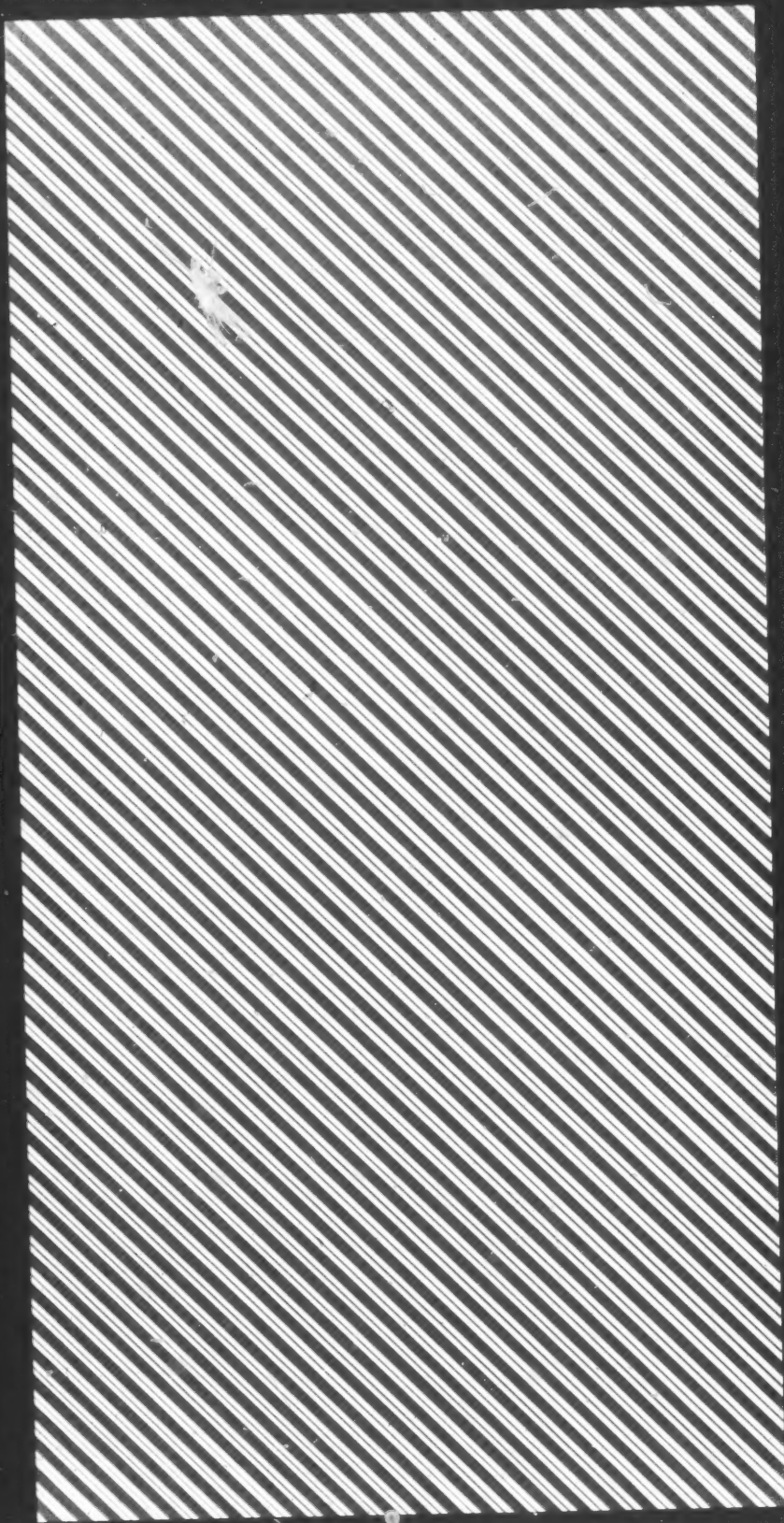
Few of these inner subtleties of organisation, these variations within the ordered unity of the surface, are easy to identify at first sight. The eye has to scan the painting continuously like a radar screen on which the various elements gradually emerge to make the readable whole. But they are essential to that whole. Without them one might have seen nothing but a coruscating surface, and have experienced little more satisfying than an optical thrill. But when one can grasp a structured presentation in which one has before one's eyes both that which is, and that which seems, and know that both are actual because they are perceived, then indeed one has had one's experience enriched.

David Thompson
London 1975

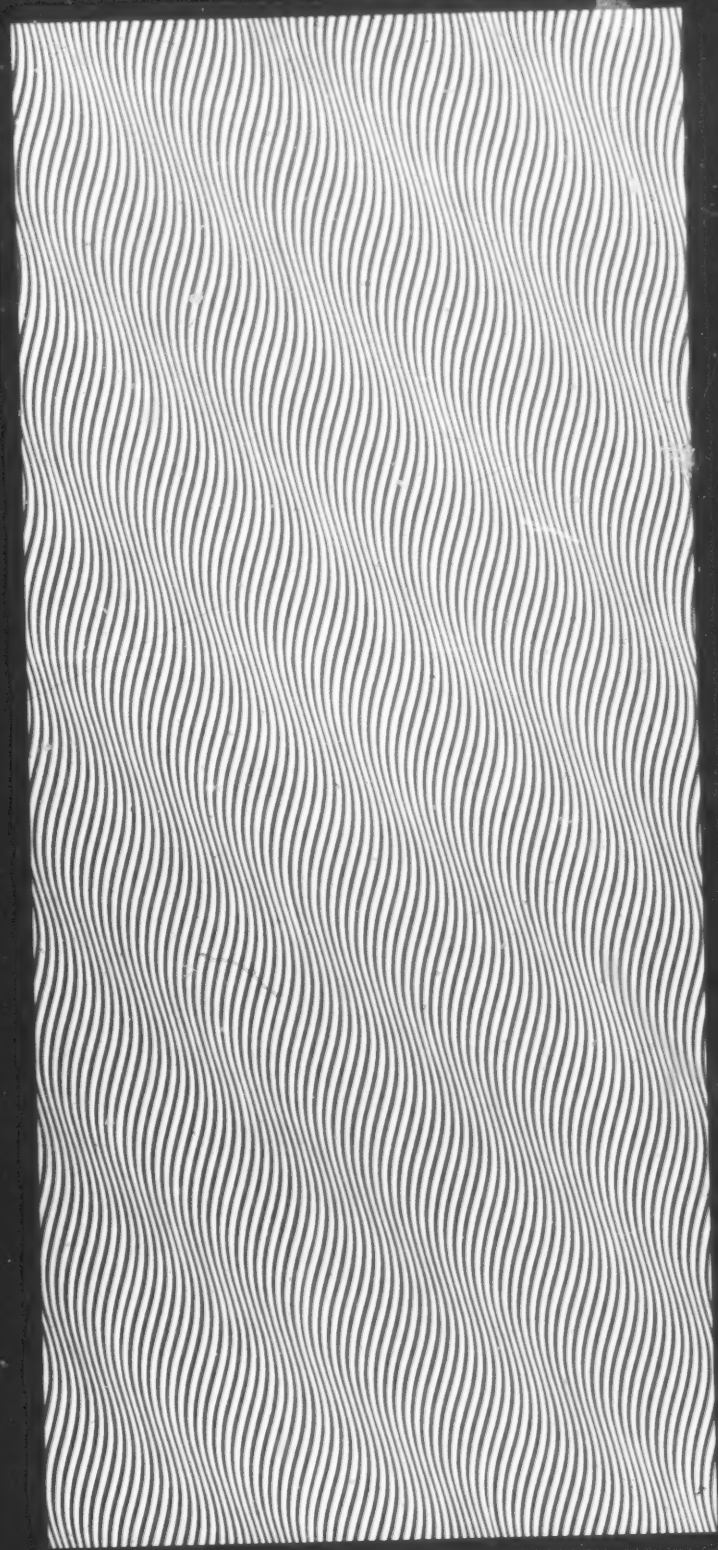






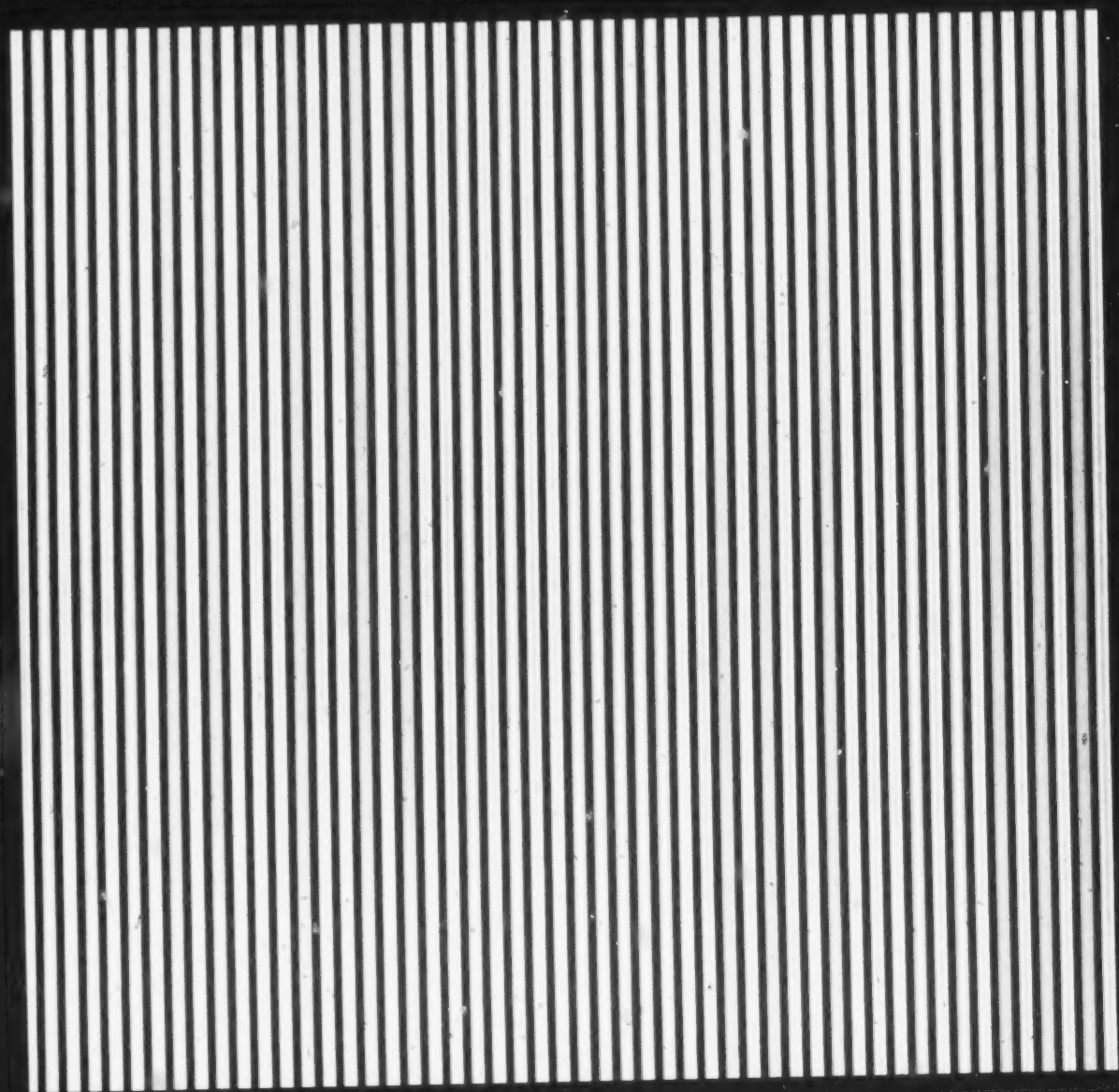


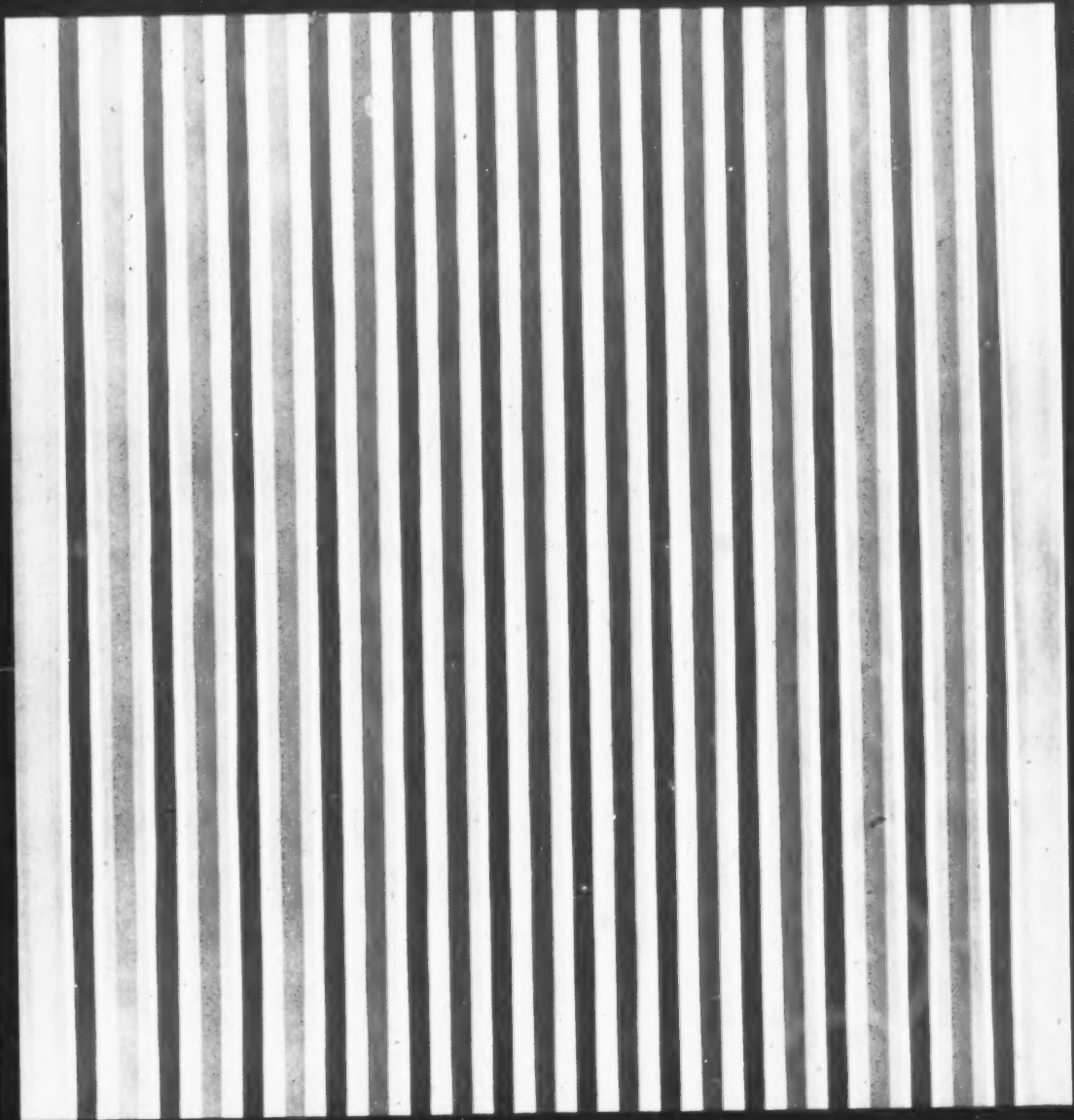
1 Veld 1971 75¼ x 154¼"



5 Shih-Li 1975 63 x 140"

2 Paean 1973 114¼ x 113½"





Untitled Gouache 1975 40¼ x 38¼" **7**

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CATALOGUE

PAINTINGS

- 1** *Veld 1971 acrylic on canvas 75¼ x 154¼"
- 2** *Paean 1973 acrylic on canvas 114¼ x 113½"
- 3** *Ch'i-Yün 1974 acrylic on canvas 83 x 83"
- 4** *Entice 2 1974 acrylic on canvas 60¾ x 54½"
- 5** **Shih-Li 1975 acrylic on canvas 63 x 140"
- 7** Untitled Gouache 1975 acrylic on canvas 40¼ x 38¼"

DRAWINGS

- 7-20** Untitled Gouaches 1974-1975

*Reproduced

**Reproduced in color



AN EXHIBITION OF RECENT
PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS BY
BRIDGET RILEY OPENING ON
WEDNESDAY 4 TO 7 APRIL 30
CONTINUING THRU MAY 31 1975
AT SIDNEY JANIS 6 WEST 57 NY